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Purification of poly-amino acid-tagged recombinant proteins has been improved by the use of a carboxymethylated aspartate ligand complexed with a third-block transition metal having an oxidation state of 2^+ and a coordination number of 6. A method for synthesizing the metal ion-CM-Asp complex is also described. Further, the metal ion-CM-Asp complex can be used for screening protein function.